DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 325 FL 025 873

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TITLE Family, Culture, School, and Community: Reflections on Language and Literacy Development.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Cultural Context; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Influence; Females; Foreign Countries; *Language Acquisition; *Language Role; *Literacy Education; Personal Narratives; *School Role; Student Journals; Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS Childhood Experiences

ABSTRACT

A study qualitatively analyzed the recollections of nine women concerning their early language and literacy development as it related to the family, cultural, school, and community experiences and contexts. Subjects were enrolled in a graduate education seminar in language development, ranged in age from 24 to 48 years, and had diverse professional experiences, personal backgrounds, and language backgrounds. The students kept journals reflecting on their personal histories of language and literacy development, particularly from preschool years to the end of adolescence, recalling significant events, situations, and people in their learning and ways in which their learning and language use made a difference in their lives. Inductive schematic analysis of the entries was conducted to discover themes and patterns within and across individual experiences in nine topic areas: family and home; peers/friends; school/teachers; books/literacy; oral/aural traditions and experiences; culture and language(s); community/environment; perceptions of self (characteristics and experiences); and trauma and major life events. Results are summarized in each topic area, and some general conclusions are drawn. Contains 26 references. (MSE)

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Family, Culture, School, and Community:

Reflections on Language and Literacy Development

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University of Northern British Columbia

Paper presented at:
American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
Montreal, QC, Canada
April, 1999

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The development of language occurs across multiple contexts throughout one's life. However, as of yet, there has been relatively little research on language development across the lifespan. The purpose of my study was to investigate the ongoing language and literacy development of educated adults as contextualized by their early experiences. I am interested in the stories people tell about their lives, and the ways in which they interpret these stories. In this talk, I will present a portion of the larger study -- a qualitative analysis of nine women's written recollections of their early language and literacy development, as rooted in family, cultural, school, and community experiences and contexts.

Theoretical framework

Constructivists describe knowledge as cognitively and socially constructed by learners, in context (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Hicks, 1996; Lapadat, 1995; Lemke, 1989). Knowledge construction is mediated by language, and, simultaneously, reciprocally influences language meanings (Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Giles & Coupland, 1991, Mercer, 1993). This viewpoint assumes diversity of participants, content, processes, and outcomes (Delpit, 1990; Lapadat, 1997). The views and interpretations of research participants, the teachers and learners themselves, are seen as essential to understanding the nature of knowledge and learning processes (Eisner, 1999; Kirsch, 1993). Yet much of the basic theoretical work of tracing language and literacy

development across the lifespan from childhood through adulthood remains to be done (Haswell, 1991; Obler, 1997; Yussen & Smith, 1993).

Much recent research examines language acquisition and emergent literacy by observing practices in the home (Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Snow & Ninio, 1986). Similarly, children's continuing language development throughout the school years, the types of reading, writing, and discourse that promote both literacy and learning in the broader sense, and the relationships to culture are the focus of many studies (McCabe, 1997; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1999; Wells, 1990). A study of adults' memories of their own language and literacy learning complements these observational approaches and adds the unique advantage of hearing the stories in the learners' own voices. As these are narratives constructed by adults about their childhood experiences, the stories are weighted with their own interpretations, and the events selected for retelling are ones that, on reflection and in the light of subsequent experience, they have come to see as formative in their lives. Educated adults who have had occasion to think deeply about the nature of language and learning may be particularly able to contribute insights about their personal experiences. Finally, by looking backward to the past rather than extrapolating forward developmentally, it is possible to examine assumptions about relationships between educational success and class, family status, literacy practices, school experiences, and so forth. Will we find obvious commonalities across participants, or diverse patterns?

Method

Participants

Participants included nine women enrolled in a graduate education seminar in Language Development that I taught. They ranged in age from 24 to 48 years. Two were fourth year Psychology students taking the course out of interest; the rest were graduate Education students. Three participants had limited professional experience, while the rest had five or more years. Their professional experiences were diverse, including speech-language pathology, and elementary, secondary, and college teaching, with specializations in learning assistance, French immersion, teaching English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education, First Nations Education, and high school geography. Two spoke English as a second language (their first languages being Korean and German respectively), while one was raised in a bilingual English/French household, and another was exposed to Gaelic along with English in early childhood. "Alice" acquired French as a second language and is fluent in it. "Lisa" has lived and worked in First Nations' communities throughout her adult life. All nine have spent all or most of their lives in Canada, growing up in rural areas, small towns, small northern cities, and one in a large urban centre. Five have children, and one has grandchildren.

Data

As a course assignment, students kept a journal in which they made regular entries over the semester reflecting on their own personal history of language and literacy development. While the assignment was required, participation in this study was voluntary. This analysis focuses on data derived from Journal 1, written over the first half of the semester, in which participants reflected on their memories of learning language

and literacy from the preschool years through to the end of adolescence. Their task was to recall personally significant events, situations, and people that made a difference to their learning, as well as ways in which their learning and use of language made a difference to their life.

Students were provided with the following examples of questions they might pose for themselves:

> How did my particular development of, use of, or struggles with language make a difference to who I was as a child? What interested me and fueled my language and literacy learning, and what impeded me? What were my preferred strategies for learning and using language? Whom did I observe or interact with that made a difference to my language learning, and how? What are some "aha!" moments when I had a sudden insight into the nature of language? What were my choices of literacy materials and ways of interacting with them? How did I see myself as a speaker, listener, writer, or reader? (course handout)

The students were instructed to formulate their thoughts in prose rather than in point-form, to structure entries around particular topics they set for themselves, to avoid holding tightly to a chronological sequence, to discuss specific examples, and to link their observations to readings and discussion topics in class.

Approach to Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to discover themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994) within each participant's journal, as well as themes commonly mentioned across participants. After reading through all the journals twice, I identified five preliminary categories that reflected topics discussed by all or most of the

participants. Throughout the coding process, these categories were reorganized and added to resulting in nine categories in all: *Family & home; Peers, friends; School, teachers; Books, literacy; Oral/aural traditions & experiences; Culture & language(s); Community, environment; Perceptions of self -- characteristics & experiences;* and *Trauma & major life events.*

Coding involved several steps. I began with a careful reading paired with margin coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of idea units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or key ideas. The next step involved sorting these identified phrases or close paraphrases into the nine thematic categories (relabelling, reorganizing, and adding categories as needed). I used a version of poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997; McCabe, 1997; see also Boyatzis, 1998) in order to retain the narrative structure in a way that was both coherent and succinct, while also representing how the writer had foregrounded or backgrounded particular elements of an episode. This approach also enabled me to avoid premature labelling. Phrases or episodes were multiply coded as appropriate. For example, a description of bedtime stories would be coded under both *Family & home* and *Books, literacy.*

Following this descriptive coding, I identified central issues or patterns for each individual and added these pattern codes into the coding. (Sometimes these were explicitly pointed out by the writers.) In addition, I wrote a brief profile for each participant summarizing central themes and patterns. The next step was a review of all the code files and profiles across participants to look for commonalities as well as differences. Conceptual mapping (Miles & Huberman) was helpful in this process. Steps still to be completed include returning the thematic analyses to the participants for member checking, comparing the code files with the topics and readings being addressed

in class during that time-frame, and examining how my own actions and beliefs might have contributed to the narratives, at formal levels as class instructor, at informal levels as conversational participant, and implicitly, as an individual with my own history of language and literacy experiences and beliefs about development (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Lincoln, 1995).

Results

The thematic analysis yielded for each participant a record of ideas and anecdotes pertaining to the nine common themes on language and literacy development, as well as interpretive patterns within and across participants. Across all nine women, most had more to say about family and home than any other topic. The role of school and teachers, and the topic of books and literacy were also discussed a great deal by most participants. Several also wrote at length about their self perceptions. Other topics were addressed at length by particular individuals but not by everyone.

Community

Although most of the women wrote only a little about their communities or childhood environments, there were some interesting similarities in their experiences. Eight of the women spent all or most of their childhood growing up in a single community. The exception to this was Sigrid, whose family moved around a lot.

Aside from Sigrid, and Judy (who lived in a city), all of the women spent their childhood in rural areas or in small communities far from an urban centre. Doris attended a one-room school enrolling 10-12 students, and Alice's rural school had 2 grades per classroom. Most of the women grew up in the same Canadian province, in various "frontier towns" with less than 50 years of history. Several mentioned that television

didn't come to their community until late in their childhood, and there was only one anecdote about the influence of TV across all the journals. However, many of the women recalled listening to radio programs and records, reading and writing (individually or with family members or peers), and fantasy play as frequent and favoured pastimes.

As a sidenote, as the researcher I felt like an "insider," not only because of my closeness in age to several of the women and shared gender, but also because I too grew up in the same province as most of them and in a similar type of community just down the road from Rita's, Lee's, and Tina's hometowns. I have visited most of these towns, and, as an adult, I have lived in Tina's and Judy's childhood communities.

The three women who described their communities at greater length were Lisa, Rita, and Emily. Lisa described the "kids' culture" she was involved in by being part of the neighbourhood gang of mixed ages and genders. It was up to children to fill their own time, and they did so by forming clubs, acting out Lone Ranger episodes, playing games like kick the can, hiking around the hills, and writing newsletters.

Rita describes first learning English by playing with the "street kids." She describes her single resource-based town as attracting many immigrants to work in the plant:

> [MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT]
> at work at the plant
> there were a lot of immigrants
> particularly from Portugal, Italy, Greece
> they wanted to make money and go back home
> these are the children I grew up with
> there were so many immigrants that I associated with
> that people with funny speech
> didn't stand out
> English, whatever the form
> had to be our common language (Rita dc, p. 15)

In contrast, Emily grew up in a cohesive, homogeneous rural community in the Canadian maritimes which had been settled many generations ago by Scottish and Irish immigrants. The community consisted of a number of intermarried, extended families. Emily described her grandparents as speaking Gaelic with their friends, and told how her grandfather passed along the Scottish oral traditions to her through singing ballads, reciting poetry, and telling stories about ancestors and history. Similar traditions were reflected across the community and in the school (for example in the school poetry and speech clubs). Other examples of the cultural traditions of the community can be seen in the forms of address:

many of the families had been there for generations
Scottish or Irish heritage
mostly last names beginning with Mc or Mac
lots of relatives around the area
we learned not to address adults as Mr. or Mrs.
it didn't provide our parents with enough information
QUOTE #2 *Living in our area there were three Duncan MacLeans all related in some way but from different branches of the family. One Duncan was elderly so he was referred to as Old Duncan. The other Duncan MacLean lived on Gander Road so he was referred to as Duncan from Gander. The other Duncan had a pond in the back of his home. Therefore he was referred to as Duncan from the pond. I would tell my parents I'm going to visit Duncan on the pond even though I was visiting his daughter and we were not going near the pond.* (Emily dc, p. 6)

Similarly, Emily describes the expectation of giving a family history when introducing oneself:

we introduced ourselves by providing a family history
QUOTE #3 *If I was introducing myself to an adult who didn't know me I would say "I'm Emily Burns from Earl of Piper." Earl was the name of my father and we lived beside Piper's Beach. Therefore I would not be confused with Uncle Terry's or Uncle Nevin's brood. . . . If my father's name was not enough I would tell them my grandfather's. Eventually we would get to the right branch.*

relating family history was part of the 'getting to know you' process (Emily dc, p.7)

Learning the pragmatic language rules and appropriate discourse styles depended on the being aware of the norms in the particular community.

Family & home

Three of the women described their parents as "educated" – Alice, who describes her parents' British private school education as a primary formative factor for her, and Rita and Judy, who both mention that, as immigrants, their parents did not have the opportunity to work in their professions in Canada. Judy wrote: "we were very poor when we first came to Canada." Thus, another commonality across several participants was growing up in a working class community and/or family.

Five of the participants, Alice, Emily, Judy, Lisa, and Rita, described their families as strongly valuing education. Judy wrote:

> [FAMILY PLACED HIGH VALUE ON EDUCATION]
> in grade 1, my mother would always ask me if I did my homework
> I always told her that I did not have any
> she did not believe me
> in Korea, students are assigned homework from a very early age
> after regular school is over, they must go to a ha-kwan
> an additional school
> it teaches them art, singing, dancing, math
> my mother always pushed me to excel in school
> my mother told me if I studied hard
> everyone would want to be my friend (Judy dc, p. 1)

However, Judy felt pressured to achieve, and when her marks dropped in junior high school, she dropped out. She reflected that:

> [ACHIEVEMENT]
> I was always at the top of my class

but whenever I didn't do well in school I would cry
I could never measure up to my sisters
I tried really hard to do well
I usually did better than most people in my class
but I was never the smartest person (Judy, dc, p.11)

If family pressure to excel might have been a factor in Judy's dropping out, the high value the family placed on education also might have helped her succeed in her return to school the following year:

when I returned to school after dropping out in grade 9
my mother got me the best tutors in the city (Judy dc, p. 3)

Like Judy, Lisa rebelled against school as an adolescent, but for different reasons. She describes her mother and older brother as great influences on her language and literacy development, and credits them with her very successful years in elementary school. However, the loss of these two people changed her view of school:

[TRAUMATIC LOSS OF MENTORS; MOTHER AND BROTHER]
when I was 12, my mother died
and my brother moved away to college
I lost the 2 people who made learning important to me
from grade 7 on I rejected learning
I was extremely rebellious (Lisa dc, p. 7)

All of the participants reported many literate activities in their home and Alice, Emily, Lisa, Rita, and Sigrid also described having many opportunities for extended conversations with older family members. On the topic of early literacy, all except Sigrid said they had many books and were read to from a young age. Alice, Emily, and Rita said they could already read on beginning school (Rita in German), and all except Lee describe themselves as learning to read rapidly and excelling in Language Arts. Lisa and

Judy were in the "top language group" and often were chosen to help other students, Sigrid was often selected to read to the class because she was considered a good reader, and Tina was placed in "enrichment" classes.

Seven of the participants named particular people who were influential in their language and literacy development and all of these primary influences were family members. Doris, Rita, and Sigrid pointed to their father as most significant, and Alice and Judy nominated both parents. Emily's primary influence was her grandfather (she lived with her grandparents and other members of her extended family throughout her early childhood), and Lisa's mother and older brother were central influences. As secondary influences, three of the nine mentioned mothers, three mentioned siblings, and three mentioned same-age peers. Two mentioned aunts, two mentioned same-age extended family members, and two mentioned teachers. One mentioned a grandmother, and another a teenage babysitter.

That fathers were mentioned in a primary role more than mothers is surprising, given the strong emphasis given to the role of mothers' input language in the research literature. The relative absence of mention of teachers as mentors also seems striking. Lisa comments that, as a teacher herself, she would like to hope that some of her students remember her as important to their learning, but says: "I have no recollection of a supportive classroom teacher." Although she mentions one English teacher who encouraged her, she says: "he never taught me in a classroom; he took me under his wing on his own time."

A final observation about participants' families is that not all spent their childhood in nuclear family structures. Alice's parents separated and her father remarried.

Lisa's mother died when she was 12. Sigrid wrote that: "my natural mother left us when I was 7 or 8 years old and I have only a few memories of her." Emily was left with her grandparents as baby when a new sibling with severe medical problems was born and her parents moved to a city to obtain medical care. She describes herself as very happy in this home filled with members of her extended family, and traumatized when her parents reclaimed her at age 6:

> my parents moved back to the Island
> I was frightened that they took me away with them
> this time in my life seems like a black hole
> my mother has told me
> I did not do well in school that year
> I became very silent
> my memory was affected
> I could no longer read
> I became unresponsive
> I lost weight and became ill
> I regressed academically and socially
> I withdrew into a world of my own
> we moved back to my old neighbourhood the next year
> two doors away from my grandparents
> my parents moved for my benefit
> from that time on I had a foot in both houses
> during the day and evening I lived with my family
> after my bath I went to bed at my grandparents' (Emily, dc, p.8)

It is clear that for these nine women, their families were extremely important influences on their language and literacy development, and their attitudes toward learning. Furthermore, their families varied in structure and typical practices, although all were literate households.

Literacy, books

All of the women except Lee described themselves as avid readers. For example, Tina said she always had her nose in a book, and Emily, Rita, and Sigrid said they read

everything they could get their hands on. Several described their joy at discovering the school or public library. Several described developing a love of reading, reciting, or writing poetry (Doris, Emily, Judy, and Rita), or of listening to or memorizing and singing songs (Alice, Doris, Emily, Lee, and Sigrid). Many listed favourite books or series at various points in their childhood, recounted details from stories, and commented on seeking out these same books as adults to introduce to their own children.

In fact, both Emily and Sigrid described spending so much time reading that it might be considered unhealthy. Emily wrote:

> my life was filled with books
> I read anything I could get my hands on
> my mother scolded me for spending too much time reading
> and not enough time playing outside with other children
> unhealthy to spend too much time in someone else's world (Emily dc, p. 4)

Similarly, Sigrid wrote of the great satisfaction she found in reading. However, she added the insight that the amount of reading she did also might have impeded her learning to use language socially:

> QUOTE: *I often chose to read when other kids went off looking for someone to play with. As stated earlier, I counted books among my best friends. . . . Relating to my peers, beyond a small core of close friends, was a painful process with which I generally felt unsuccessful. I didn't feel like I fit in, and I was often at a loss over how to join into or maintain a conversation with them. It was easier to hide in the library or at home with the security of my books than to venture into social situations where I didn't know what was expected of me.* (Sigrid j1, p. 10)

In contrast to the others, Lee developed a self perception of herself as a poor reader, due to school activities that emphasized social comparison of skills. These

included a "test" of alphabet knowledge in kindergarten, round robin reading in grade 1, and sessions emphasizing timing their rate of silent reading in grade 6. She wrote:

> [SELF PERCEPTION AS POOR READER]
> I began to see my self as a poor reader
> at some point in the early elementary years
> while I always demonstrated strong comprehension skills
> I struggled with oral reading
> when reading out loud in front of others
> I stammered
> struggled over words
> this was a great source of embarrassment to me
> I would dread being asked to read out loud
> my teacher in grade 6 had us count the rate at which we read
> when silent reading
> most of my friends could read much faster than me
> this contributed further to my self-perception as a poor reader
> and further embarrassment
> I rarely read for pleasure
> I focused my attention away from reading
> I went to lengths to avoid it whenever possible (Lee dc, p. 5)

Lee describes this self perception as arising "despite my perfectly adequate exposure to literature" as a preschooler, and enjoying being read to, and being able to "'read' many Dr. Suess books by memory" before starting school. The consequence for her was that she avoided reading unless required, and then she would select books "by the width of the spine."

Five of the women, Alice, Doris, Judy, Lee, and Lisa, wrote that they saw themselves as writers or would-be writers in their school years. Judy and Lisa, in particular, explained that they found writing to be a route to understanding and self expression. Judy preferred to write poetry and to keep a diary. Lisa described writing to help the healing process: "I learned to write my thoughts down, then burn the pages." She

also discovered journalism as a means for social action. Alice, on the other hand, commented:

> I have often dreamed of being a writer
> but there is so much more to it than loving to read or speak or write
> there is such a skill to making the printed word come alive (Alice dc, p. 6)

As an other contrast, Sigrid described herself as successful with school writing tasks that involved recounting the words or replicating the story structures of others, but far less comfortable with tasks such as journal writing that required to record her original thoughts in her own voice.

In summary, most of these women described their predispostion to read a lot for pleasure as a personal inclination that arose naturally out of their experiences with literacy in the home as small children, and/or their early and positive introduction to literacy in primary school. Other than this, school itself was not attributed as having a causal role in their love of reading, although several mentioned particular activities at school, such as making books (Lee), going into 'the reading house,' (Judy), the English Literature 12 course (Rita), or grammar lessons (Lee, Rita) that extended their writing skills or their interests in particular genres of literature.

School, teachers

All of the participants wrote a considerable amount about their experiences in school. Most of them began school with strong oral language skills, and well prepared for literacy. Most of them also described themselves as excelling at school during the elementary years, and in certain subject areas in high school. They recounted anecdotes of being singled out for awards, or having their work displayed, or being chosen to help

peers who were less successful. Several wrote about positive memories of particular instructional activities or subject areas that they enjoyed. Yet, only Emily wrote that she liked school. Furthermore, when all the remarks about school are compiled across the nine participants, it is clear that the tone is overwhelmingly negative.

Some of the remarks centre on the topic of boredom. Alice wrote that knowing how to read on entering school resulted in her not being sufficiently challenged:

> QUOTE #1: *I learned to read at a very early age and was reading fluently when I started school. This was not a real advantage to me though, because I was often bored. I attended a small rural school with two grades to a class and a very traditional teacher who had to keep things manageable so I was made to sit in the reading circle and follow along as my classmates stumbled to master "See Lucia."' and "See Buttons." I remember getting into trouble for not attending to the person reading because I was reading ahead to the pages which had three of four lines of text!* (Alice dc, p. 3)

Eventually, Alice's teacher began sending Alice and another student to the library during reading lessons. Alice discovered a way to cope with the lack of challenge; she developed a friendly rivalry with this student:

> we kept each other going all through elementary school
> I worked to beat him in everything and vice versa
> we both excelled (Alice dc, p. 30

On the topic of boredom, Lisa wrote:

> [SCHOOL AS A NEGATIVE FACTOR]
> I don't remember any significant moments at school
> that helped me improve my language ability
> the boring parts
> tracing letters for hours in my McLean's writing book
> seem to have taken up most of the school day (Lisa dc, p. 4)

She explained that boredom was one of the reasons she skipped out often in high school. Similarly, Judy mentioned boredom as a precursor to her dropping out in grade 9. In contrast, Emily wrote that she was never bored in school.

Although Alice used competition with a school peer in a positive way, Judy, Lee, and Sigrid wrote at length about the competitive atmosphere at school and its emphasis on social comparison, and how these had a negative impact on them. The themes of competition and pressure to achieve run throughout Judy's entries, and she relates these to feelings of being different or less capable. Lee, as described previously, came to see herself as a poor reader, which had an impact on her learning and life choices.

Sigrid wrote that she was "shy and self conscious" at school, in contrast with being "confident and at ease in my conversations" with siblings, friends, and kids in the neighbourhood -- even "downright bossy." She described hating to have attention drawn to herself at school, such as the "embarrassment" and "agony" caused her because of her "unusual name." She recalled:

> QUOTE: *Throughout school, I was nervous speaking in front of the class and didn't like to give answers to questions. I stuttered and I got "tongue-tied", especially when I had time to rehearse what I might have to say. I was sure that the other kids would laugh at me if I stuttered, or worse, would think I was showing off if I got the answer to a question right. Many times I wanted to respond to the teacher, but was too afraid to speak out voluntarily. I didn't mind reading out loud, but I think that was because I was really good at it, and the words that I was saying weren't my own. That made oral reading safe, unlike having to speak my own mind.* (Sigrid j1, p. 7)

She offered the insight that "the pressure of fitting in socially" at school was a large source of her distress. Doris recorded how upset she was at being singled out by a teacher for extra help with her "terrible handwriting," but when her handwriting improved after

many of these sessions, she began to take pride in her handwriting and came to appreciate that teacher.

All nine of the women wrote about events at school that lead them to feel inadequate or bad about themselves. One particularly dramatic example is the following from Lisa:

> [POWER OF LANGUAGE TO MANIPULATE]
> in grade 7
> I learned about the manipulation of language
> the message was, don't trust people in authority
> QUOTE #1: *One aspect of the manipulation of language came to me unexpectedly, and the message, don't trust people in authority, has stayed with me to this day! ...One afternoon in grade 7, I skipped out with a group of friends and went to a bush party. The next day, the vice-principal called me in and said that he knew where we had been because everyone else had told him, so he just wanted me to confirm the story. I told him the whole thing. Later, when I found out that he had lied to me, and that no one else had said anything, I was devastated. I was a novice at this kind of thing, but the fact that someone that I had expected to always tell the truth, a grown up with authority, had actually lied to get something he wanted changed my life.* (Lisa dc, p. 4)

Other negative factors mentioned included being made to do instructional activities not at an appropriate level (Alice, Lee), and being insufficiently prepared for university (Judy, Rita). In addition, as an Asian and a speaker of English as a second language, Judy experienced miscommunication, differences in discourse expectations, and racism at school that she found very frustrating and upsetting.

Culture & language(s)

Neither the notion of culture nor the impact of speaking languages additional to English were mentioned at all by Lee, Lisa, or Sigrid, all of whom portrayed themselves as mainstream English-speaking Canadians. Tina, Doris, Emily, and Alice each wrote some entries about languages and culture. Tina briefly described a best friend who came

to Canada from India, and how she taught her friend English and her friend taught her some Hindi. She mentions that this initiated her great interest in learning other languages and was a factor in her choice to study both French and German in high school. In Doris's family, her father's first language was French:

> my father's first language is French and his second language is English
> my mother's first language is English
> we spoke English at home
> my father often spoke to us in French
> we always answered in English
> my siblings and I speak terrible French
> insufficient exposure to acquire the language
> but we have faultless accents like native speakers (Doris dc, p. 3)

Despite her father's efforts, Doris learned only the majority language of her community.

As described previously, Emily's cultural background with its strong oral traditions was a highly important factor for her growing up in a long-established community with a Scottish and Irish heritage. This also held true for Alice, who wrote about her strong sense of her British heritage, and the associations this had for her with a having good education, the value of education, the importance of literacy, the value of studying other languages (French and Latin), and the of learning formal rules of politeness in the form of both pragmatic language skills and socially appropriate behaviour. For example, Alice wrote:

> I credit my parents for my affinity for languages
> and my ability to speak, write, and read well
> my parents were educated in private schools in Britain
> so they have a prodigious background
> in history, literature, language, overall knowledge (Alice dc, p. 1)

She observed that many of her peers came to school less well prepared for literacy, or not having been taught "the niceties and social protocols" and therefore embarrassing themselves "by their gauche speech behaviours."

For Rita and Judy, who both learned English as a second language, the topic of culture and language(s) was the predominant theme in their journals. Rita's family moved to Canada from Germany when she was 4, and although she learned some English from "the street kids," she had to work hard to learn English in school. However, because her family lived in a multicultural, multilingual community of immigrants, she did not stand out as "different," as many of her peers were also learning English. She describes thinking first in German then translating into English, although at some point she switched to thinking first in English. She wrote:

> once we started school
> the English came quite quickly
> I don't know at which point I switched over to English
> as my main language of communication
> I know I did
> because my mother had to struggle
> to keep up with me
> German was still the main language at home
> by the time I was in mid-elementary
> I went between the two languages quite easily (Rita dc, p. 14)

German was used in Rita's home in both spoken and written forms throughout her childhood. As she learned English and received formal instruction in it at school, the German vocabulary did not keep pace, and written German began to seem difficult and hard to decipher. Nevertheless, she described herself as a mixture of both cultures and

languages and said that although she has lost some of her German, she still finds she can communicate quickly and easily with German people when she is around them.

Judy's family moved to Canada from South Korea two years before she was born. She said that "by the time I was 3, I knew I was to speak Korean at home and English with the neighbourhood kids." However, when she entered kindergarten, she struggled with English, and was pulled out to work with an English as a Second Language teacher.

> I did not have the same command of the English language as other the kids
> when I entered kindergarten at age 5
> I thought I understood English and spoke it perfectly
> but my lack of knowledge of English was apparent
> a girl in my class asked the teacher why I talked so funny (Judy dc, p. 8)

Not only was the language strange, but also there were cultural and discourse differences.

> at school
> we were allowed to express our thoughts
> tell the teacher why we were angry or sad
> at home
> a child is taught to obey their parents
> and not to express emotions (Judy dc, p.8)

Judy wrote about several occasions of miscommunication at school, and her puzzlement and frustration at not being understood. As she began to switch to speaking predominantly English at home, the experience of not being understood was repeated, as her mother often did not understand the English. Judy wrote:

> my mother was fearful that her children would lose their ability to speak Korean
> she encouraged us to use our mother tongue at home
> my older sisters were ashamed to speak Korean
> we became more comfortable speaking English
> as we spent my time at school and less at home
> soon English became the main language of communication
> my parents spoke to us in Korean
> we would answer back in English

I soon lost my ability to speak my native tongue
at the end of grade 1
I remember thinking to myself that I no longer sounded like my dad
around the same time I was losing my Korean
I was reading actively
by grade 3 I had forgotten most of my Korean (Judy dc, p. 9)

So, in contrast to Rita, Judy rapidly lost her ability to speak her first language. However, unlike Rita, she described always standing out as "different," as well as incidents of overt racism:

[EXPERIENCE OF RACISM]
my sisters and I were the only Asians in the school
I remember coming home crying
because someone would not play with me
or someone had called me a racist name
a lot of kids made fun of me
because I couldn't say certain words (Judy dc, p.9)

Several different patterns and responses are apparent in the participants' writing on this topic. Doris and Judy, whose heritage language was not spoken in the surrounding community, or was seen as a source of difference and reason for unkind treatment by peers, avoided or quickly discarded their language other than English. Rita, however, who grew up in a community where speaking English as a second language was the norm, was able to learn English and Canadian ways while also retaining her German language and culture. Alice, rather than trying to erase her cultural difference saw it instead as an advantage over her peers. Emily acquired the cultural traditions and linguistic values of her homogeneous community. However, it was perhaps only on leaving her community as an adult that she acquired the distance and experience within another cultural context (mainstream Canadian) to enable her to focus a lens on her community's particular

culture. In contrast, participants like Lee and Sigrid, who have remained within their childhood language and culture, have not acquired a perspective from which to view the characteristics of their own cultural experience, and thus seem almost "blind" to culture. The participants who had to negotiate two languages or cultures, although describing experiences that were often difficult and frustrating, were enriched in their cultural and linguistic perspectives.

Conclusions and Implications

When asked to keep a journal reflecting on their language and literacy development from birth to the end of high school, the nine women participating in this study wrote about many topics. For example, Emily wrote at length about oral traditions, community, and extended family. Both Judy and Lisa wrote about rebellion and resistance, and writing as a route to understanding. Sigrid, Judy and Lee reflected on their self-perceptions as language users and the insidious consequences of social comparison at school. Rita and Judy wrote about the challenges they faced learning English as a second language. All of the participants discussed family, school, and their experiences of becoming literate. Many also wrote about languages and culture, peers, community, threats to their self-perceptions, and affirming events or people in their lives.

Several results from this study, relating to community, family, literacy, school, and languages and culture, have interesting implications for theory and educational practice. Many of the women came from Canadian rural communities or small towns. These communities were typically working class and "frontier-like," and television was largely absent as an influence. Most of the families were settled rather transient. For the most part, voices of educated adults like these are absent from the research literature on

language and literacy acquisition. As these experiences are told retrospectively in the participants' voices, the participants themselves have weighed and interpreted the influences on their own language and literacy development. From their recounts of their experiences, it is clear that simple general rules are insufficient to explain patterns across these individuals.

Most of the participants identified aspects of their family and home environment as the predominant factors in their language and literacy development. All came from literate households, and most reported having the opportunity for extended talk with an older family member. Several experienced family structures other than the traditional nuclear structure. A surprise, given the focus of the research literature, was the extent to which these women pointed to their fathers as a primary influential figure in their language or literacy development, and saw their mothers in a secondary role. Also surprising was the relative absence of mention of teachers as mentors. Further research is needed to determine how typical these perceptions are among educated adults, and also to discover why teachers were not seen as mentors.

A consistency across these educated women was that most described themselves as avid readers, and they seemed to see this as a personal inclination arising from their positive experiences of early literacy in the home or kindergarten/grade 1, rather than as something arising out of subsequent formal instruction at school. This result points again to the importance of positive experiences of emergent literacy if children are to develop a love of reading. These participants who loved reading persisted in doing a great deal of reading regardless of their subsequent experiences at home or school. Several also saw

themselves as writers in their school years. Two, in particular, wrote about writing as a route to self-understanding.

Although most of the women wrote a considerable amount about their experiences at school, a surprising result was the extent to which these recollections had a negative tone. They spoke of boredom, negative experiences of social comparison, anxiety about how they were perceived or treated by schoolmates, and events that lead them to feel inadequate or bad about themselves. This is particularly surprising in that these women had excelled at school, had received recognition for their achievements, and had gone on to undergraduate studies and then graduate work. Furthermore, as most of them chose to become teachers, I would have expected that their recollections about school would have emphasized the positive. This worrisome finding calls out for further efforts to improve schools to make them more welcoming places for students, and to provide learning opportunities suited to diverse students and their individual needs. It also emphasizes the importance of educators taking students' lives into account. Factors like the loss of a parent, differences between home and school in discourse expectations or languages spoken, or students' self perceptions that impact on schooling cannot be determined simply through bureaucratic labels (e.g., "ESL," "single-parent home"). They can only be understood by getting to know students and their home and community circumstances.

A final, interesting observation is the extent to which individuals discussed languages and culture. Three participants who portrayed themselves as "mainstream Canadian" did not write about culture at all in their journals. In contrast, those whose parents had recently immigrated and thus were brought up in two cultures (Canadian, and German, Korean, or British), forefronted culture and language-culture connections. These

participants tended to see culture as overarching, and family, school, and so on as experiential subcomponents of culture. As well, those who were brought up in a distinct subculture (Canadian maritimes -- Scottish heritage), exposed to two languages in the home (English and French), or had formed a close relationship with someone from another language and culture, reflected on cultural issues. In this study, it seems that those participants whose experiences were limited to "the mainstream" had a certain "culture-blindness," whereas others confronted with, integrating, seeking out, or living within two cultures had more opportunities to become "culture-aware" or "culture-rich." This supports the move toward recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating diversity in our schools as a fundamental way of enriching education for all our students.

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